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Black Contemporary: Field Notes and other Peculiar Deposits

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Abstract

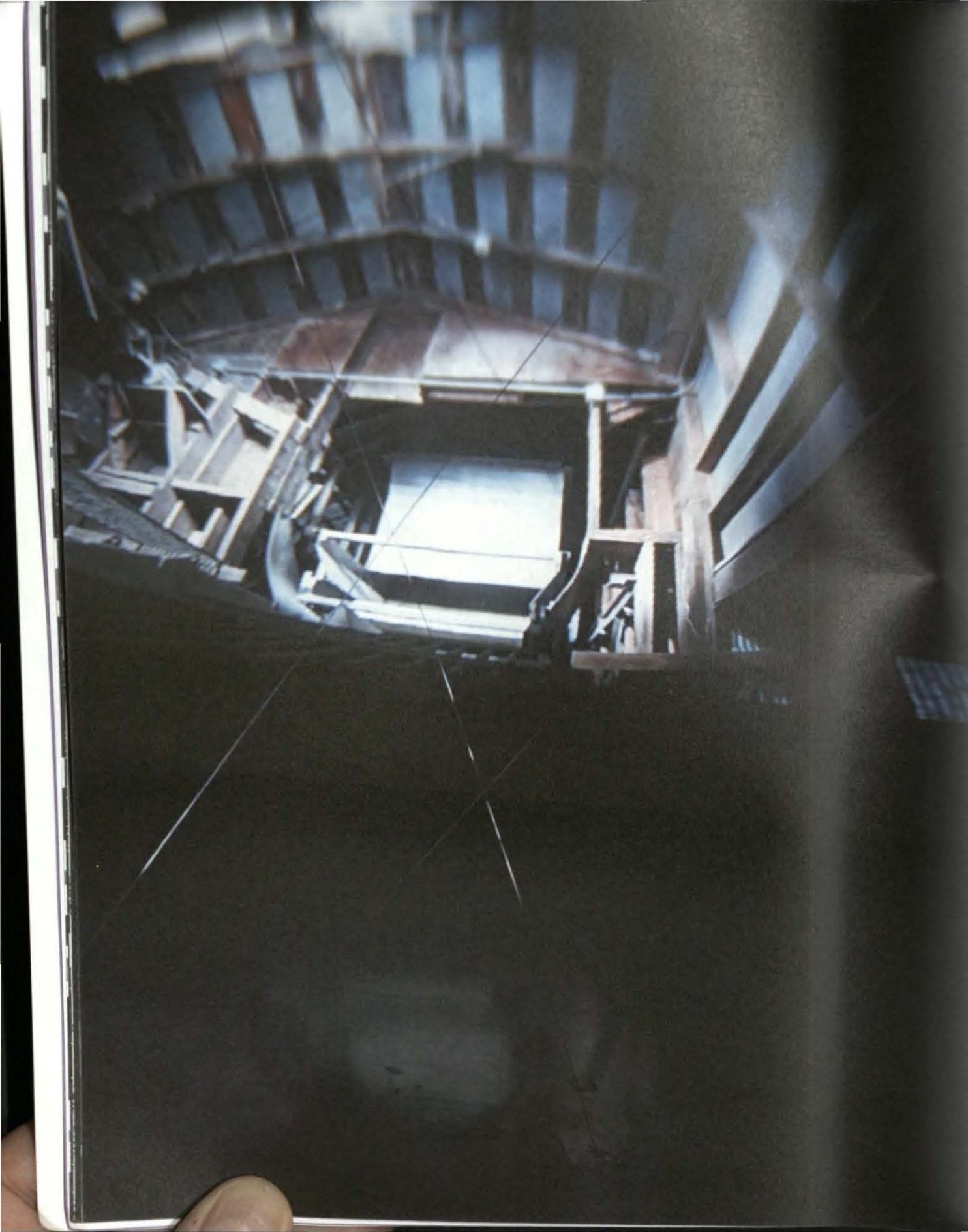
This article addresses a dormant farm site in which a body of work is being developed in effort to examine the past character and future shape of Iowa's inherited landscape. The content of this exploration was generated in response, and as an addition, to David Heymann's essay "Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic" published in the 1990 winter issue of *Iowa Architect*. In that critically perceptive article, Heymann traces the evolution of the Midwestern landscape by examining farm buildings within rural Iowa. Central to the evolution that Heymann cites is the specific topography due to wind erosion. Heymann uses this dynamic to illustrate a perceived stability given the tectonic nature of farm building construction and associated spatial configurations. If the centerline of Heymann's thinking is that instability in land morphology (though difficult to optically register) has produced a tectonic perceptual stability, the conceit of this essay is that such stability no longer exists, and that a shift in the scales of economy has yielded an outwardly visible tectonic instability. Thus to Heymann's transformation is added the inverse consequence and thereby directly linking the visual evidence of an unstable (derelict) building set to the intellectual evidence of an unstable ground plane. This relationship of figure to ground is the basis for staging a series of intensely modulated spatial reconstructions within an antiquated seed drying facility that, like Iowa's farm buildings and land-use practices, is intrinsically grounded in the spatial and cognitive confines of its surround.

Disciplines

Architecture

Comments

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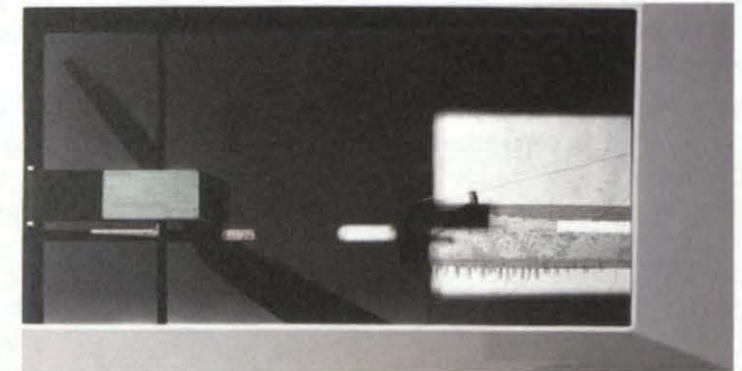


Black Contemporary

Field Notes and other Peculiar Deposits

Peter P. Goché

*"Take sixteen men, short and tall ones as they leave church on a Sunday morning and let each of them put one shoe after the other and the length thus obtained shall be a just and common measuring rod with which to survey the land."*¹



1_Aerial Viewing Monitor
Photograph by P. Goché

This article addresses a dormant farm site in which a body of work is being developed in effort to examine the past character and future shape of Iowa's inherited landscape. The content of this exploration was generated in response, and as an addition, to David Heymann's essay "Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic" published in the 1990 winter issue of *Iowa Architect*. In that critically perceptive article, Heymann traces the evolution of the Midwestern landscape by examining farm buildings within rural Iowa. Central to the evolution that Heymann cites is the specific topography due to wind erosion. Heymann uses this dynamic to illustrate a perceived stability given the tectonic nature of farm building construction and associated spatial configurations. If the centerline of Heymann's thinking is that instability in land morphology (though difficult to optically register) has produced a tectonic perceptual stability, the conceit of this essay is that such stability no longer exists, and that a shift in the scales of economy has yielded an outwardly visible tectonic instability. Thus to Heymann's transformation is added the inverse consequence and thereby directly linking the visual evidence of an unstable (derelict) building set to the intellectual evidence of an unstable ground plane. This relationship of figure to ground is the basis for staging a series of intensely modulated spatial reconstructions within an antiquated seed-drying facility that, like Iowa's farm buildings and land-use practices, is intrinsically grounded in the spatial and cognitive confines of its surround.

The world is precisely that thing from which we form our perceptions, not as personal beliefs or imperatives, but in so far as we are all governed by a universal source of light and its consequent

shadows. This optic disclosure, the layering of light and shadows, absolves us of our flesh and bone and allows the body to enter time, deep time, and thus rooted (as pointed out by Mircea Eliade) in our collective transcendent reality – the inscribed spatial history of a particular setting developed between human beings and the environments they occupy.

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to instantaneously scrutinize everything. This impulse is sustained through an often precisely choreographed threshold. As architect and artist, my goal is to assist the occupant in maintaining his or her initial ontological wakefulness through staging often-temporary assemblies within a host space and thereby extend the passage sequence.² Black Contemporary serves as laboratory for ongoing investigations intended to expand our experience of knowledge specific to the study of spatial phenomena. In using the term here, I am referring to a way of knowing that seeks to describe the underlying, essential qualities of human experience and the context in which that experience happens. The aim is to use these studies as the basis from which to discover underlying commonalities that constitute the essence of experiential awareness specific to material culture.

The field station is located at Black's Seed Farm (26107 530th Ave.) – two miles south of Ames, Iowa. Using experiential perceptions as spatial conditioners, current studio projects focus on the act of making and curating a series of research assemblies within a dormant seed-drying facility constructed in 1979. This work might best be understood as a peculiar deposit of site-adjusted spatial phenomena that indicates the presence of, and makes clearly recognizable, its context as referent rather than source or setting. In addition, a nascent work in the adjoining 'bins' is being developed that involves working petroleum ink across veneer plywood and assembling found farm detritus on top. Each work is evidence of the labor of working land, what is left behind, what soaks in and what is furrowed into gesture. It is part of a collection of socio-cultural observations.

Each inquiry is part of a process by which the cultural history and perceptual experience of a particular setting is revealed. The resultant staging yields, what Grant Wood depicts in his 1934 mural *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*, the foundation for subsequent forms of human civilization specific to labor and an intensely modulated means of production. The cumulative effort might indicate the potential use of this facility, and all of Iowa's derelict agricultural facilities, as laboratory inasmuch as it offers opportunities for a rigorous set of observations, practices and experimentation.

To this end, the act of constructing a spatial phenomena field station within one of rural Iowa's derelict facilities assists in cultivating place-based knowledge through direct engagement with Iowa's farm community. It is a subconscious engagement whereby we become immersed in the world and do not succeed in distancing ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world. It employs chiaroscuro; a pictorial practice of arranging light (the conscious) and shadow (the sub-conscious) in the service of authenticating the cultural essence of lived space and thereby mine its capacity to summon the subconscious and reoccupy the inherited landscape as a dimension of life entwined with the present, a part of our ongoing perceptual experience.

My goal for this laboratory is that it becomes an internationally recognized field station whereby expert architects, artist, curators, theorist and philosophers in the field of spatial phenomenology are invited to participate in the examination of ongoing research assemblies and present their work to the student body through an on-site seminar and public lecture in the College of Design. Thus far the work has been enriched by the critique of Hesse McGraw (San Francisco Art Institute), David Leatherbarrow (University of Pennsylvania), Adam Yarinski (Architecture Research Office) and, most recently, Deborah Hauptmann (Iowa State University).

The site also serves as laboratory for students who wish to conduct independent studies under my advisement. On a practical level, I want to provide students with a framework for making full-scale inquiries, for getting beyond representation as a method of design and figuring out the potential of fabrication and assembly processes on their own. On a deeper level, however, we want to gain exposure to an intimate scale of production, and to confront the dichotomy between experiential and abstract notions of space. Students understand making as an investigative and a navigational situation, and reconcile the often-considerable gap between the representation of ideas and the construction of experiential things.

Concurrently, I intend to use this set of inquiry as the primary generator for the development of a book, the objective of which is to build on the role spatial phenomena has always had in design thinking and to assist the resurgence of experimental productions in design education and practice. As the process of design delivery has become almost completely reliant on digital means, spatial experiments in actual time with actual people and actual medium at actual size are a crucial counterpoint.



2_ 'Mother, the potatoes are in the cellar...' Photograph by Cameron Campbell

images_following pages

3_Research Assembly one, (photo: Cameron Campbell)

4_Research Assembly one, detail (photo: Cameron Campbell)

5_Research Assembly two

6_Research Assembly two, detail

7_Aerial viewing station

8_Aerial viewing station

9_Aerial viewing station, detail

10_Ground viewing station

11_Camera obscura

12_Camera obscura

13_Second Impression by Zitong Feng and Ishani Pandya





ENDNOTES

¹ Curtis M. Brown, *Boundary Control and Legal Principles*, Third Edition (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1986).

² Author, "Staging: Making a Scene," in *Architecture as Performing Art*, edited by Marcia Feuerstein and Gray and Read Ashgate Ltd., UK, p. 75.

IMAGE CREDITS

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Peter P. Goché is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Architecture and Industrial Design at Iowa State University. Goché holds a Masters degree in Architecture from Iowa State University. He taught in the Department of Art at Drake University before joining the faculty at the Iowa State University, where he coordinates and teaches design studios exploring architecture in relation to culture, landscapes and fabrication. For the last decade, Goché has produced research assemblies specific to the ritualized landscape of Iowa. He is founder of *Black Contemporary*, a rural field station dedicated to the study of spatial phenomena. He is co-investigator/author of *Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa* funded by the 2007 AIA Board of Knowledge Committee. Goché has presented his design-work and scholarship at many conferences and cultural institutions throughout North America and Western Europe.

www.blackcontemporary.org

